DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 418 SP 027 516

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TITLE Peer Helpers: Overview and Caution or Peer Helpers: Buyer Beware!
PUB DATE [86]
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; *Helping Relationship; *High School Students; Listening Skills; *Peer Counseling; *Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; *Training Methods

ABSTRACT

As counseling programs are being strained by the ever increasing needs of today's students, other methods of helping the students are being used. The peer helper program is one method that is optimistically being tried. Information is presented here on the background, training procedures, and evaluation methods (both subjective and objective) of the program. It is difficult to evaluate the program, as is pointed out in one evaluation study that had inconclusive results. Although the peer helper program appears to be useful and worthwhile, caution is urged until enough data is gathered to substantiate the effectiveness of the program. (Author)

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PEER HELPERS: OVERVIEW AND CAUTION

OR

PEER HELPERS: BUYER BEWARE!

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ABSTRACT

As counseling programs are being strained by the ever increasing needs of todays students, other methods of helping the students are being used. The peer helper program is one method that is optimistically being tried. Information is presented here on the background, training procedures, and evaluation methods (both subjective and objective), of the program. It is difficult to evaluate the program as pointed out in one evaluation study that had inconclusive results. Although the peer helper program appears to be useful and worthwhile, caution is urged until enough data appears to substantiate the effectiveness of the program.

PEER HELPERS: OVERVIEW AND CAUTION

OR BUYER BEWARE

In today's complex world, students are faced with an ever increasing number of choices, decisions and difficulties. The availability of controlled substances, the disruptions in family structure, and the changes in opportunities are just a few of the many stresses which face young people. At a time when young people are already struggling to achieve independence and maturity, more and more often the additional stresses tax their abilities to cope.

Counseling programs in the school systems feel the strain. As student problems continue to increase, the ability of the counselor to meet the needs of students becomes limited. It seems appropriate that other methods of helping the students be explored.

One method used more frequently in schools today has been the peer helper program. A natural process has been observed in which some students are sought out for their empathy and moral support. McManus, (1984) pointed out that "peers already in the natural environment are in an optimal position for providing help to others." Through a program developed to expand on this natural phenomenon it was felt that peer helpers could be used to

fill a need, complement the school's counseling program, and simultaneously help themselves. Students themselves have been selected and given special training that enables them to help with the problems of other students.

IN THEORY, PEER HELPER PROGRAMS ARE EFFECTIVE

In theory, the benefits of the peer helper program seem to be many. The counselor may be helped in his/her job of reaching more students by having the peer helpers act as intermediaries. The general student population may be helped in a time of need by having access to someone, even when the counselor is not available. The peer helpers themselves may be helped because their training assists them in improving their skills. Finally, the school may be helped through a positive effect on the overall school climate.

There are many different peer helper programs being used today. One example in the Natural Helpers Program (Akita & Mooney, 1982) first developed and put to use in Washington state. In this program students are selected to receive at least thirty hours of training basically in communication skills and decision making. The selection is done by students through a survey process. Those students mentioned most often are chosen for the program. The primary goal of that program is to provide skilled listeners in the school setting.

Of the various programs in use, one difference is the process used for selection of the peer helpers. A cross-section of students is most often considered the ideal. The ways used for selecting peer helpers are student self selection, faculty nomination of students, and selection by objective criteria (Rockwell and Dustin, 1979).

After choosing students for training, it must be decided what kind of training to give them. Most of the peer helper programs emphasized tailoring the program to fit the setting and the unique problems of a local area. The program should reflect the style of the counselor or individual who is coordinating the program (Campbell, 1983).

Generally, the peer helper programs have basic characteristics in common: laying a foundation or planning how the program will be carried out, training in a systematic way, and determining goals. Goals usually include dealing with drug and alcohol abuse, problems with friends, and family problems. Since it is recognized that these problems can lead to school related problems more goals may be added.

The actual training of peer helpers most often includes reflective listening, improving communication skills, communicating and understanding feelings (both verbally and non-verbally), decision making, problem solving, and some type of referral awareness process (McCann, 1975; Campbell, 1983).

EVALUATION NEEDS TO BE DONE TO PROVE EFFECTIVENESS

If the effectiveness of the peer helper program is to be determined, it is necessary to evaluate the program. Evaluation helps "to estimate how well the job is being done, and to identify areas that need improvement" (Tolbert, 1932). Evaluation can show if a program is helpful or detrimental.

Peer helper programs can be difficult to evaluate. It is not always easy to gather data and the evaluations can be complicated by a multitude of variables.

Three evaluation methods currently in use are the pre post test method, self-report method, and the case study method. These methods present some difficulty because they are all subjective.

The pre and post test method (Dougherty and Taylor, 1983) the evaluator tries to determine if some change occurred during the implementation of the program, usually by measuring self concept changes. This method is complicated by the complexity of self concept and by the frequent lack of a control group. Unless a control group is used though it is difficult to determine if some change occurred because of the program.

The self-report method of evaluation essentially involves checklists, rating scales, or questionnaires to determine if the program met its goals (Dougherty and Taylor, 1983). The instrument for evaluation is usually a Likert-type scale (i.e. strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion, agree, strongly agree).

This method is typically confined to the attitudes of the participants. While the data may be useful to the leaders and provides some information to the school it is a weak method of determining overall effectiveness.

Then there is the case study method of evaluation. A focus is made on one individual to determine the effectiveness of the program. One such study suggests that behavior problem students many times make good peer helpers (Mitchum, 1983).

Subjective evaluation methods are not the only way of judging the peer helper program. Objective evaluation methods are in use and are generally more reliable.

One objective evaluation method is suggested in the Natural Helpers training manual (Akita and Mooney, 1982). It involves the peer helper collecting data on how many students he or she helped and the kinds of cases. The problem is that the data is only as reliable as the peer helper. The peer helper might be inclined to make up cases to help support the program or to show that he or she is doing what is expected.

Probably the best method of evaluation is the comparison group method. It is objective and strengthens the validity of the program by comparing students who received peer helper training with students who did not receive the training. But even this method can also fall short of expectations.

As a case in point, a study (Johnson, 1980) was conducted at a junior high school in Washington State. Using information

from a school wide survey. 28 students were selected (student self selection) for a three day training program as peer helpers. This group was considered the experimental group.

Another 28 students were chosen for a control group. They were not given peer helper training, but were matched to the experimental group using several variables: grade level, sex, G.P.A., and attendance record.

A comparison was made of the number of discipline referrals acquired by each group of students. It was hoped the information gained would help determine a measurable effect of the peer helper program. But those trained in the peer helper program had too small a decrease in referrals to be significant. The comparison was inconclusive.

SUMMARY

Counselors who are sensitive to the changing needs within their schools are ever watchful for ideas, research and programs that will be useful to them. It is their desire, their responsibility, to search out that which is beneficial to their students and their school.

Because of increasing student problems, a need has been identified, programs have been developed, and those programs are being implemented.

Group processes, such as peer helper programs, are potent processes. With such a powerful tool, one needs to be careful,

to make sure it is being properly used, and to be sure it is actually beneficial. When a program has clearly defined goals, it should be possible to chart the changes that achieve those goals.

To date, no clear information has been shown that verifies whether or not the peer helper program is truly achieving its goals. It appears to fill a need. It appears to be effective. But more evaluation needs to be done and more facts need to be gathered. From those now using the peer helper programs, help is needed with research. For those contemplating the use of these programs, caution is advised. Every program, even a good one, needs to prove its credibility.

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